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AUTHOR Garr, Madeline
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ABSTRACT

A technique adopted for a course in advanced conversation in English as a second language used a combination of writing, acting, and self-monitoring activities to teach a variety of culturally valuable skills: narration, expression of opinion, and discussion of common issues in culturally sensitive ways. Students write plays as a group about specific situations with specific personalities and perspectives. The group playwriting allows for ample discussion of both grammatical and cultural issues. Students then study and perform the play for videotaping, with subsequent self-analysis. Readings, class discussions, guest speakers, and other techniques are used to focus on the specific issue addressed. The approach has been generally successful, with the students showing willingness to evaluate and correct themselves. Some difficulty has arisen with student groups whose cultural background makes expression of opinion difficult. The technique is recommended as a means of promoting communicative instruction. (MSE)

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Madeline Garr

Paper presented at the 22nd Annual TESOL Convention
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Demonstration Title: How Writing, Acting and Monitoring Create Good Advanced Conversation

Presented by: Madeline Garr

The course I wish to talk to you about today was designed with the Advanced Conversation Student in mind. This student has a multitude of linguistic as well as cultural needs. The approach I wish to describe is an attempt to meet these needs in a creative and communicative environment.

Advanced Conversation students come to us with varying degrees of vocabulary, structure, cultural experiences and expectations. It is the job of the teacher to assess the needs of these students and to design a course which can bring out, to the fullest, language on the deeper levels of English. When studying how we communicate with each other, it is obvious that we begin with conversational strategies and move into storytelling, usually about our lives, fairly quickly. Just as often, we opinionate about everything from the weather to deeper issues in politics, religion and philosophy. If our students are to be assimilated into the American society or into university life, it is necessary that they learn how to opinionate. It is also necessary that they learn which issues are the most likely to be discussed and learn how to handle discussion of these issues in culturally sensitive ways. It is also important that they learn how to negotiate in culturally difficult situations.

There are many techniques available that can teach these skills. In the five years I have been teaching Advanced Conversation, I seem to be continually revising the course. In doing so, however, my goals remain the same. They are:

to challenge the student to use his/her language to deal with controversial/complicated issues.

to provide the opportunity for the student to monitor his/her language use as well as to evaluate and correct that usage.

to encourage the student to reach beyond his/her own cultural bias in order to understand both the cultures represented within the ESL classroom as well as the culture in which he/she finds himself/herself.

to expose the student to current events and issues which impact his/her life and the lives of those around him/her.

Throughout the years, my main concern and criticism with most techniques I used was in the area of monitoring. How could I teach the students to monitor their mistakes and correct those mistakes? It was important to me that whatever method I used be sensitive and non-threatening. In the classroom itself, I use a great deal of reflective listening. My more direct corrections occur when I retape their taped reports and ask them to listen to the corrected version. However, when the students are in the midst of a discussion, it is both awkward and rude to interrupt in order to correct their utterances. At the same time, they are in the class to learn to use the correct and culturally appropriate form. Thus the dilemma. In the Spring of 1987, therefore, as a result of this ongoing concern, I began to formulate my present approach.

The use of drama in the classroom is not a new idea. there is a long history of seeing life as lived-out roles. Shakespeare wrote

in the 16th century that all the world was a stage and we were but the players. More recently, Irving Goffman, discussed the dramaturgical model of Language in the book Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. According to Goffman we both consciously and unconsciously create roles depending upon the situation in which we find ourselves, becoming both the director and the performer in real life social interaction events. This role playing is something we all do to work out our relationships with the people around us. It is done by all peoples in all languages although the role playing is determined by culture, social situations and the expectations of others within the social interactive event. The use, then, of drama in the classroom as a reflection of real life is not that innovative or new an idea. In 1978, Scarcella wrote in the TESOL Quarterly an article which dealt with the use of socio-drama in teaching communicative skills. Others, namely Di Pietro, Donahue, Parsons, Pennycock to name a few, have been discussing the use of role play for the last several years.

At about the same time that I was reading the various approaches toward teaching Advanced Conversation, a text entitled Factions and Fictions by Michael Lamb cam to my attention. This book presented various situations and defined roles to go with the situations with the recommendation that the students be assigned roles and problem solve the situational task. The approach seemed interesting, varied and fun. The theory coincided with all that I had been reading yet it still did not answer the question of how to help the students monitor their language usage. After a great deal of thought, I decided that I would adapt a Counseling Learning

Technique. Instead of spontaneously enacting the role play, the students would instead write the play. I would present the situation around which the play would be written as well as assigning them roles complete with personality descriptions and individual perspectives on the issue at hand. The students would then assume these roles and create their own lines. These lines I would write down using the overhead projector. As we would go through this process, ample opportunity would be available to talk about the best way, grammatically and culturally, to say what they would want to say. They would be able to see the correct form on the projector screen and compare it to the form they used. This would give them instant feedback and would in fact operate as an external example of the internal monitor I wished for them to develop within their heads.

After the "play" was written, I would type the play and distribute it to them for study and preparation for taping. At this point we would move into the acting stage. The students would perform the play in front of a video camera. I hoped that this activity would elicit high interest since many of the students would have never seen themselves on TV before. After the taping, we would move into the monitoring stage. The tape would be analyzed using grammar, pronunciation, cultural appropriateness and character representation as criteria.

In deciding on this approach, I also decided to write other situations based on issues I have traditionally explored in class. I would present the targeted issue via readings, class discussions, guest speakers, movies, etc. After the content of the issue was

presented, the students would be expected to take the knowledge of the issue and enact the roles they were to assume in order to solve the given problem. All roles were to remain secret so that the students would have to employ various conversational strategies in order to learn about the other students' characters. Content activity, then, would be reinforced by the use of the target language in portraying a point of view and voicing a particular opinion. Throughout the entire process, the students would be engaged in the experience of stretching their language ability to express their ideas, monitor their language use and understand both the cultural content as well as the cultural background of the roles they were to portray.

That was my theory. What happened in reality? When I first used the approach with a class, there was high interest and motivation. The students in the class were from various countries and had been in the USA for three or more months. They responded well to the technique and created funny, innovative or serious solutions to the issues presented. My monitoring goal was met more effectively than it had ever been and I was encouraged. The next class, however, was composed of one language/culture group for whom opinionating was culturally impolite. As a result, their solutions for the situations were were culturally inappropriate in relation to the roles they were to have portrayed. Although their use of language was varied and far reaching, their strategies of problem solving taught them little of the target culture in which they were immersed.

Throughout the year, I have used this approach with five more

classes. Generally, it has met the goals that I continually set for myself and it still elicits high interest and participation from the students. I have also used variations of the technique, eg. taping them spontaneously enacting the roles rather than writing the play and having them "perform". They then sit and watch the tape, finding their own errors and learning to self-correct. This too has proven to be successful and motivating. From my own experience, I am convinced that this technique is a valid way of teaching the students how to monitor their errors since I have discovered that part of the problem is that they don't think they make errors and can therefore not hear themselves as they speak the language. The use of the overhead, the tapings and the monitoring, all help the students get past this block.

In conclusion, this is just one more technique to add to the wealth of ideas available to teachers who try to teach with the needs of their students in mind. Language is for communication. Anything we can do that will effect this goal is worthwhile.